DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 250 677 CS 207 882

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TITLE NCTE and the Scholar-Teacher.
PUB DATE 21 Nov 82
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (72nd, Washington, DC, November 19-24, 1982). For related documents, see CS 207 881-884.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational History; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Instruction; Higher Education; Language Arts; Language Skills; *Professional Associations; *Professional Development; Scholarly Journals; Teacher Improvement; *Writing for Publication
IDENTIFIERS *National Council of Teachers of English; Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has put steady emphasis on teachers' inquiring minds and on their awareness of the arts, particularly the arts of using and interpreting language. NCTE's inquiries have been concerned not only with literary and linguistic scholarship, but also with curricular matters, teaching procedures, and such professional concerns as teacher load and censorship. Each year several hundred authors contribute to NCTE's professional journals. It also publishes a varying number of books and pamphlets, and its affiliates publish numerous additional journals, pamphlets, and books. Teachers who prefer talking to writing have an excellent opportunity to do so at affiliate conferences and NCTE conventions; over the years, between 25,000 and 30,000 persons have had spots on NCTE convention programs. Throughout its history, NCTE has encouraged young teachers, previously silent teachers--all teachers--to think constructively about their profession, to study some part of it in detail, and to speak or write about their thoughts and findings. (HTH)

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NCTE and the Scholar-Teacher

J. N. Hook

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J. N. Hook
NCTE, Nov.21,1982

NCTE and the Scholar-Teacher

Poet John Ciardi was the speaker at Friday night's banquet.

Earlier this year, when he was first told that he had won NCTE's Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children, he made this comment:

> It's my pleasure to remind teachers that what a teacher is supposed to be is a reader. Unless a teacher, even in elementary grades, has some openness of mind, some intellectual life, all is lost. I had a friend who was driven out of Austria by the Nazis and became a professor of education. He asked a student to name three plays of Shakespeare. She couldn't name one, but she said that, after all, "I'm going to teach first grade." Whatever a teacher does in the classroom, the teacher should bring to it an inquiring mind and some awareness of the arts, as an example of what a mind <u>is</u>, to thirsty students.
>
> Bless the good teachers [Ciardi concluded]. They shine.

When I first read Ciardi's comment, I went back to the sentence "Whatever a teacher does in the classroom, the teacher should bring to it an inquiring mind and some awareness of the arts, as an example of what a mind <u>is</u>, to thirsty students."

It occurred to me that in its more than seventy years of existence NCTE has put steady emphasis on teachers' inquiring minds and on their awareness of the arts, particularly the arts of using and interpreting language. I jotted down a few examples of how NCTE, from the early years to the present, has encouraged inquiry, curiosity,

probing, not only in the relatively few research professors but also among the rest of us--elementary teachers, junior and senior high school teachers, community college teachers, and teachers in the great universities.

NCTE's inquiries have been concerned with not only literary and linguistic scholarship, although there have been many excellent examples of both of these, most notably, perhaps, in the interpretation of literary works taught in the schools and the colleges. Hundreds of English Journal and College English articles, for instance, have been devoted to clarification of plays by Shakespeare, novels by Melville and others more modern, poetry down through the centuries.

Many other NCTE articles deal mainly with curricular matters, teaching procedures, and such professional concerns as teacher load and censorship. These also are the products of inquiring minds, and in their own ways can be just as careful, just as scholarly, as an article on Vonnegut's use of metaphor or on the structure of paragraphs.

I looked at the cumulative index of the English Journal for 1981 and found that its articles, some short and some relatively long, had been written by well over three hundred different authors in that one year. The annotated indexes for earlier years (1944 to 1963, and 1946 to 1970) showed a total of thirteen to fourteen hundred different classroom teachers who had been willing to share with others the products of their inquiring minds. The topics

were grouped by the compilers of the indexes and ranged from articles on Absence from School and Advanced Standing to Yearbooks and William Butler Yeats--306 groups in all, in one of the indexes.

Authors of articles in Language Arts and College English and NCTE's other journals are not written by as many people, but each year they total several hundred additional names.

The inquiring minds are not solely the property of authors of journal articles. The Council publishes a varying number of books and pamphlets each year. As one example, there is a 1982 publication entitled Structuring for Success in the English Classroom, prepared by an ad hoc committee on Classroom Practices in Teaching English, which, with changing membership, has been producing similarly useful books for about a decade. There were five members of the committee this year, and the articles in this book were written by thirty-four English teachers with inquiring minds.

The Council's affiliates each year publish a total of a hundred or so issues of their own journals, as well as occasional pamphlets or even books. The journal issues range from a few pages to as many as a hundred or more. Some of the articles are equal in quality to those published by the parent organization. Inquiring minds are as active on the local and state levels as on the national.

Some teachers prefer to talk rather than to write. They get their chances at affiliate conferences and at NCTE conventions. I made a rough calculation of the number of people listed in this year's convention program as participants. There are about 34 columns with some 35 names per column, totalling 1190 names. This is the Council's 72nd convention. Although early conventions

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had not nearly so many participants, we may estimate that over the years (and including duplicates) between 25 and 30 thousand persons have had spots on NCTE programs--perhaps as many as 15 to 20 thousand different individuals.

Such figures show, I believe, that the NCTE pioneers did something right. They, too, had inquiring minds. They came to the first conventions with questions, not answers. At the very first meeting, in 1911, they raised penetrating questions about college entrance requirements, teacher preparation, articulation, writing, speaking, individual differences, the humanities, problems of small high schools, the elementary and high school curriculum, and methods of teaching. The leaders did not come in with ready-made programs; they did not attempt to foist any single program or curricular philosophy or methodology on the members.

James Hosic, chief founder of NCTE and the first editor of the English Journal, announced that the Journal "aspires to provide a means of expression and a general clearing house of experience and opinion for the English teachers of the country." Note the term clearing house, which here implies a publication that would present varied points of view as the profession searched for truth. The NCTE in general has avoided a party line, especially about course content, curriculum, and methods, although through its resolutions it has often adopted firm positions on such matters as teacher load and censorship. Just this morning the membership passed resolutions relating to women's studies and the desirability of integrated language arts curriculums. As a result of the written and oral contributions of many of its members, the Council often did reach

consensus on many matters of curriculum, but that is different from having decisions made by a central committee. The Council represents the workings of democracy, not an oligarchy and certainly not a dictatorship.

Hosic stated a belief that has underlain all of the Council publications since he wrote it at the end of the Council's first year: "We do not wish to root out, tear up, and overthrow, but we are eager to move steadily forward. The Journal does not worship at the shrine of tradition; it does not prize school practices merely because they are old. Social conditions change and schools must change with them."

In the earliest years of the English Journal, it is true, perhaps as many as half of the articles were written by people recognized as professional leaders. But even in those years the editor was encouraging the unknowns to speak up. They reported their classroom experiences and experiments, explained their positions and theories related to controversial questions, and reported on bits of formal or informal research they had conducted.

The Council's articles and reports began to have effect early. In 1915, four years after the founding, then-President E. H. Kemper McComb stated at the convention, "Reports based on study and investigations, made by active teachers in the field of English instruction, have cleared the ground for building up conditions necessary for successful teaching. . . . Must a school revise or create a course of study? Let it take the report of the Joint

Committee. Does an abyss yawn between elementary and secondary school? Bridge it on the Council's report on articulation. Are books for [students'] reading sought? Take them from the Council's list. Is a play needed for school use? Let the Council be the guide to it. Does a tyro want to know the latest sound practice? Give him the English Journal. Is the question grammatical nomenclature or the training of teachers? The Council's reports will suggest an answer."

In early conventions nearly all the speakers were people already prominent in the profession. In those days that was standard. Teachers and others went to conventions to be told what was what, to sit briefly at the feet of the masters. But that gradually changed. Particularly in the past thirty years there have been fewer and fewer long lectures, more and more panels and other discussion groups. In the 1950's the Council passed a resolution to the effect that it considered participation in a discussion to be as significant a professional contribution as was a more extended presentation. In today's conventions, although some presentations are by people called in the program "Familiar Faces," others are by people designated as "New Faces," who have never been on a Council program before.

What I am saying is that the Council throughout its history, but increasingly since World War II, has encouraged young teachers, previously silent teachers, all teachers--to think constructively about their profession, to study some part of it in detail, and

to speak up or write about their thoughts and their findings. And the teachers have responded. They have made Language Arts, English Journal, and College English informative, lively, sometimes controversial, and repeatedly helpful to classroom teachers. They have contributed at times to the relatively technical pages of Research in the Teaching of English. Dozens of specialists among them have written for English Education. And hundreds of both young and experienced college teachers have enriched the pages of College Composition and Communication and the late lamented Abstracts of English Studies. Smaller numbers have written for the SLATE Newsletter and the CSSEDC Quarterly, addressed to high school department chairs.

Not all of what these contributors write or what they say at conventions is "scholarly" in the traditional sense. Much of it is based on practical experience, not on months or years of study in a library cubicle. But experiences, supplemented by background reading and observation, can also be a sound basis of scholarship. And that is the kind of basis that many Council members employ for their writing and their speaking.

Much of what they discuss is not earthshaking. I used to tell my prospective teachers that every day they should be engaged in research--research with a small r, not capitalized Research with elaborate measurements and coefficients of correlation and all the rest of the paraphernalia. "Always be trying something a little bit new to you," I advised them. "A poem you've never taught before.

A different procedure in teaching spelling. A day when you read aloud to your classes some literary bits that you love passionately. A period in which you and your class share some recent reading experiences. Five minutes of silently contemplating a painting or a few minutes listening to Tschaikovsky's "Overture to Romeo and Juliet." Note how well your little experiment works. Try it again, maybe in an altered way. Keep alive. Keep your mind alive. Ruts are dull things to be in."

It is accounts of such experimentation, not necessarily on a large scale, not necessarily scholarly in the PMLA sense, that have occupied and do occupy a considerable proportion of the pages of NCTE journals and the fifteen or twenty minutes of many convention talks. In the September, 1982, English Journal, for instance, I found an account of an experiment with reading aloud to students, an explanation of the similarities between writing and running, teaching about the Holocaust, writing about rats and bats and vultures, cooperation between teachers and librarians, novel ideas for letter writing, and more. Those articles represent the inquiring minds that John Ciardi was asking for, and they represent the clearing house that James Hosic hoped for in 1911 and 1912.